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Silence and Solitude: Encounter with God

Jackie L. Halstead

Christian spiritual disciplines have been drawing people close to God for centuries. These practices are rich and varied and steeped in God's consent. Much of the Protestant Christian community lived without them until Richard Foster brought them to our attention through his classic book *Celebration of Disciplines* in 1978.¹ It was as if a vast hidden treasure had been discovered. Many wondered where they had been! A student in my course *Disciplines for Christian Living* angrily asked, "Why have I not been told about these sooner?"

Why indeed? The richness of this treasure was inaccessible yet did not limit God. We have not been bereft of a deep meaningful relationship with God even though these ancient Christian disciplines were not known to us. We can point to people who were spiritual giants and walked closely with God all their lives even before we knew of some of these ways. So, are these disciplines necessary? In what way do we benefit by seeking them out and making them part of our lives? The answer to these questions is, again, that God is not limited. We can and have lived without them. However, there is great benefit in practicing these ways. In this article, I will take one discipline, silence and solitude, and portray the manner in which it has enriched my life and drawn me closer to God. In preparation, it is first necessary to articulate assumptions that must be in place in order to truly realize the blessing of this discipline.

The first assumption is we realize that God loves us without condition. We do not earn this love nor do we lose it through our weakness and sin. It is a gift—the ultimate manifestation being the life and death of God's son, Jesus Christ. We can live with peace and the comfort of living in God's keeping. At times this love is affirmation and peace. At other times, it is a gentle confrontation as the Spirit brings to our mind the areas we need to address. And, at times, it is silence—the opportunity to trust God without the blessing of awareness of presence. When I lead people into silence during retreats, I begin with a look at our image of God. Why would I want to spend time with a God who I experience as punitive and harsh? As I come to know God as love, I relish the time in solitude.

The second assumption one needs is that God is active and God's presence is constant in our lives. This activity goes beyond what we find in scripture. This may seem to be obvious, but our rhetoric does not always match our lifestyle. We attest to the living presence of God, but our actions portray a belief that God's activity in the world has ended. We now fend for ourselves. There is little difference between my level of worry and anxiety and that of the person right next to me who does not believe in God. Belief in God's ongoing activity in this world changes the way I live and think. It also means that when I am with God, there are two sides to the conversation. The prophet Habakkuk talks of the necessity of making noise when one is with an idol. It is not alive. "But the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before him" (Hab 2.18–20). We are silent before the living God.

1. R. J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins), 1998.

The third assumption is that we will struggle in this life. It is not easy. That is what we have been promised through scripture. We are shown this time and again in the examples of the servants of God—especially in the suffering of Jesus. This fact is not hidden from us, yet we react as if we were promised a problem-free life. I learned this when we lost our baby when she was stillborn. I was so angry and hurt that I spent three years distancing myself from God. I could not understand why God would repay my faithfulness by allowing my baby to die. I did not believe God had caused the death, but knew God could have prevented it. When I eventually did let go of my anger, it was not due to an acceptance of our loss, but to my loneliness for God. This was a major turning point in my walk with God. I had never been without a relationship with God and I realized that the relationship is what is important. I would rather cling to God in my confusion and anger than be separated from God. I learned that God is not my servant: it is I who am the servant. This is an important factor in spending time with God in silence and solitude. When I spend time with God in this manner, it is not I who control the agenda: God determines the outcome.

These assumptions are not always firmly in place when one begins the journey with silence and solitude. As we make ourselves available for God's shaping, God continues to refine and make us most useful as kingdom instruments. With these beliefs in place, we turn our attention to the experience and wisdom of those who have gone before us.

Jesus is the primary example of one who practiced silence and solitude. The gospel writers give numerous examples: Jesus spent the night in prayer before choosing his apostles, Jesus went out alone in the morning and in the evening as a regular practice, and Luke 5.16 states that Jesus "often went to a solitary place to pray." One day in particular portrays this life practice in an especially poignant manner. Matthew 14 gives an account of the beheading of John the Baptist. John's disciples went and told Jesus and verse 13 tells us that when Jesus heard the news, he withdrew to a solitary place. I have read past this verse many times without grasping its significance. John was the cousin of Jesus, his friend, the one who baptized him and foretold of his ministry. He was probably the only living person who understood Jesus' role and ministry. This must have been a tremendous blow to hear of his death. So, Jesus did what came naturally. He withdrew to a solitary place. He needed to be comforted by his father. He needed to grieve the loss of this dear friend.

Unfortunately, the crowds found him and moved by compassion, he healed the sick. This was likely a lengthy happening and was followed by the feeding of the five thousand—another event that must have taken some time. In verse 23, we see Jesus at last finding time alone with God. "After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone" (Matt 14.1–23). What a difficult day that must have been. It is no wonder that he longed to be alone with his father.

Nouwen tells of another time in the life of Jesus in Luke 12 in his article "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry." Jesus spent the night in prayer, then chose his twelve apostles, then together they went to minister to the people. Nouwen makes a case for the importance of the progression of moving from solitude to community to ministry rather than jumping immediately into ministry when we have an idea, then calling for help (community), and then going to God in prayer (solitude). When we begin, as Jesus did, in solitude, we come to know God and the overwhelming love God has for us. Our identity becomes grounded in this love. We move into community and do not expect others to be perfect; i.e., God. When they slight us, intentionally or unintentionally, we can let it roll right off because our identity is firmly planted in God's love. Together we move into ministry and take that love into the hurting world.²

My experience with silence and solitude began with structured guided retreats at the Cenacle Retreat House in Houston, Texas. I began attending retreats led by Fr. Matt Linn, the author of the book *Sleeping with Bread: Holding on to What Gives us Life*.³ This small book was my entre into the world of the ancient church traditions and I was intrigued with what I might learn from its author. I was not coming for the silence, but for opportunity to get to know this Jesuit who seemed to understand God's love. This retreat was a

2. H. J. Nouwen, "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry," accessed August 1, 2013, http://entermission.typepad.com/my_weblog/files/moving_from_solitude_to_community_to_ministry_henri_nouwen.pdf.

3. D. Linn, S. Fabricant Linn & M. Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding on to What Gives You Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1995).

weekend comprised of presentations on Friday night, Saturday morning, afternoon, and evening, and a presentation and worship on Sunday morning. The times between presentations were in silence (including the meals). The weekend ended with a “talking” lunch.

These silent retreats have been and continue to be life-changing. I learned to relish the silence. I learned how to be with God—how to listen. A pattern emerged almost immediately during the retreats that is now familiar to me. I always come with a load and it takes me about a day to let go of what I am carrying—concerns about my work, family, relationships, health, etc. I then experience what I’ve come to call a “wire brush scrubbing.” It is painful, but cleansing. As I settle into the silence, God brings to my mind the things that I need to address. It can be actions, thoughts, and grudges...anything that is not of God. I approach these retreats both with excitement and trepidation. I know I will be faced with shortcomings—those that emerge are rarely a surprise. When I am honest with myself, I know what needs to change even before I arrive. As God and I deal with these issues, I sense God’s gentle chiding. It is never harsh. I feel incredibly loved as we work through them. And then—what I really come for—a wonderful time of leaning into God’s embrace. I rest in God’s incredible love.

I went on one or two of these weekends each year for about ten years and then was ready for a longer stint. I looked to St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit movement, for my next step. He compiled spiritual exercises to help Christians enter into the life of Christ while on retreat.⁴ The retreats historically were in a 30-day format and were divided into four “weeks” or movements. Very simply, the first week focuses on one’s own sin, the second on the life of Christ, the third on the suffering of Christ, and the fourth on God’s love. An individual is led through these movements with the guidance of a spiritual director. In contemporary times, Jesuits are required to make (participate in) two 30-day retreats in their lifetime. In addition to these long retreats, they go on an annual 8-day retreat centered on the spiritual exercises. As I considered my next retreat, a 30-day retreat was not realistic with the life stage of my family or with my work, so I began smaller. I took a couple of shorter Ignatian retreats and then began making an annual 8-day retreat. These intense times of silence and solitude with God have exceeded my expectations. They are very important to me. I have now been on four of these annual 8-day retreats and will continue them as long as I am able. I consider it the most important and the most difficult work I do all year.

What I have discovered in these retreats is that the longer I am in silence with God, the deeper God cleanses my being. They follow the pattern of letting go, wire brush scrubbing, and being loved, yet each cycle is deeper. At times I spiral back and forth to the scrubbing, the being loved, more scrubbing, letting go. The pattern is consistent yet unique each time. God’s chiding is always gentle. It is painful and difficult, yet I am wrapped in God’s embrace. I spend these days walking for miles, sitting and journaling, praying, sketching, singing—wasting time with God. The director gives me passages with which to pray (typically a psalm and a gospel reading). These change based on what God is doing with me. God is the one setting the agenda. We follow God’s lead. The location is a college campus and I stay in a guesthouse. I pick up my evening meal and lunch for the following day and take care of breakfast on my own. I meet with the director for an hour each day and the rest of the time is just God and me. It does not feel like solitude. I am not alone. I did feel lonely when I first began making these retreats, but I now have a strong sense of God’s presence.

On one of these retreats, the director asked me what I would like to address. I said that I would like to focus on my relationship with God and the gender discrimination that I face. I have been on the faculty in two Christian universities and in both places have been one of the few women in the Bible colleges. Thus, intentional or unintentional, I face some biases. The director suggested that we focus on my relationship with God and come back to the gender discussion if God brought it to my attention as the week progressed. I was given a psalm and a portion of scripture from the gospel each day that dealt with being in relationship with Jesus.

I was surprised when, on the third day into the retreat, I had a strong sense that God wanted me to let go of my frustration with the gender issue. I could not believe it! I had been fighting for equality since I was a little girl. How could God ask that of me?! I did not want to let it go and wrestled with God for the next three days. Each

4. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Society of Jesuits, 2012).

day as I met with the director, he told me to stay with this in prayer and remember that God loves me. He continued to give me passages with which to pray. I slept very little during those days and was ready to throw in the towel. However, I trusted the process and at the end of third day of wrestling (five days into the retreat), I heard, “Jackie, you’re thinking in absolutes.” It occurred to me that God cared about justice issues, but wanted me to take them out of the center of my heart and allow God to be at the center—to allow God to address the concern with me. My, that was freeing! It was a significant insight for me and shifted the manner in which I carry that burden. I did not come to that realization, however, until the fifth day. The space and time to come to the issue and then wrestle through it were vital. I know God is not limited by time, but these longer times of silence allow me to move away from the distractions of life and focus more and more intently on God.

On my return from these retreats, I am asked if I have enjoyed my vacation. It is difficult to explain how challenging yet wonderful these weeks are. I do feel physically rested and refreshed. The time allows me to address the exhaustion of my life. Yet, what is most significant is the clarity and insight God gives me. I may not have a specific answer, but I come away from those times with my priorities back in place. As Nouwen says, the more time we spend with God, the more we come to know God and to know that we are loved without condition.⁵ Some of the seemingly monumental hurdles shrink and I move forward to address them in a non-reactive manner. There are times when I go to a retreat with a specific decision in hand that I want answered. However, what is most common is that God just wants to love me and that is what I need.

I now lead guided silent retreats under the auspices of the Institute for Christian Spirituality. We hold at a retreat center in Nashville and follow the format of presentations and silence. The presentations are generally theological grounding and education on prayer forms. I started leading these retreats twice a year as I was often asked by people within the Churches of Christ to offer them. They want to first experience them with a known entity before they launch out to participate with other groups. We keep the number small in order to facilitate an intimate experience. They are a joy.

I encourage you to dip your toes into this river. Start small if you are new to silence and solitude—perhaps a couple of hours. If you are an extrovert, the challenge will be making yourself still for the time and turning off the external noise. If you are introverted, the challenge will be turning off the internal noise. The effort is worthwhile. If you have been on a short retreat, consider lengthening the time to a couple of days or even longer. I also include a caution: have people who are in prayer for you. This is a practice that the enemy would like to discourage. It is best to have someone with whom to process the time such as a spiritual director or a mature spiritual friend. I include a retreat guide here for your use if you are going on a self-guided retreat. My graduate students use it on the silent 48-hour retreat that I require in my courses.

There is nothing that equals uninterrupted time with our focus intently on our God. You will be changed and blessed and it will not be easy, but it will whet your appetite for more. If our Lord and Savior made this part of his practice, perhaps we may need to consider doing the same.

5. Nouwen, “Moving from Solitude.”

Self-Guided Silent Retreat Guide

Allow the Spirit to determine the time allotted to each activity. If you feel inclined to eliminate, increase, or add something, do so. The point is to listen to the Spirit, not fill up the weekend. There is really no right way to do this. Keep the phrase *wasting time with God* in mind.

Friday

1. **Arrival and settling in.** Turn off cell phone if at all possible.
2. **Recreation.** Walk or ride bike. Enjoy creation and clear your mind.
3. **Silent listening.** Find a quiet comfortable place to sit for a couple of hours.
 Start with centering prayer or just be quiet and offer a prayer of dedication of this time to God. Invite the Spirit into the weekend. Include one or several of the following options:
 Scripture readings (choose one and read it repeatedly throughout the weekend)
 Matthew 4.1–11
 Luke 6.12–49
 I Timothy 2.1–7
 Isaiah 58.1–12
 or whatever you want
 Readings for reflection (Choose a book—read short sections or chapters. The goal here is not quantity, but the introduction of an insight. I often use a book by Henri Nouwen.)
 Reflection
 Prayer—active or contemplative
 Journal Writing
 Art (I like to sketch, but anything is fine)
 Music—choose music that complements but does not detract from attending to God.
4. **Meal.** As you eat, think about where the food comes from. For example, as I eat my bread, I think about the flour, then how it's made of wheat, then to the earth and sun and rain. It helps me be mindful of how ultimately everything goes back to God. (I haven't quite figured out how to do this with artificial sweetener. ☺ I guess the chemicals can be broken down into organic compounds.)
5. **Silent listening**—see above. Before you sleep, think over how you've been blessed today and what has been challenging.



Saturday

Silent Listening

Recreation

Meal

Silent listening

Meal

Nap

Silent listening

Recreation

Eucharist—the Lord's supper. This is a dedication of the time to God.

Meal

Silent listening

Blessings and challenges

Sunday

Silent Listening

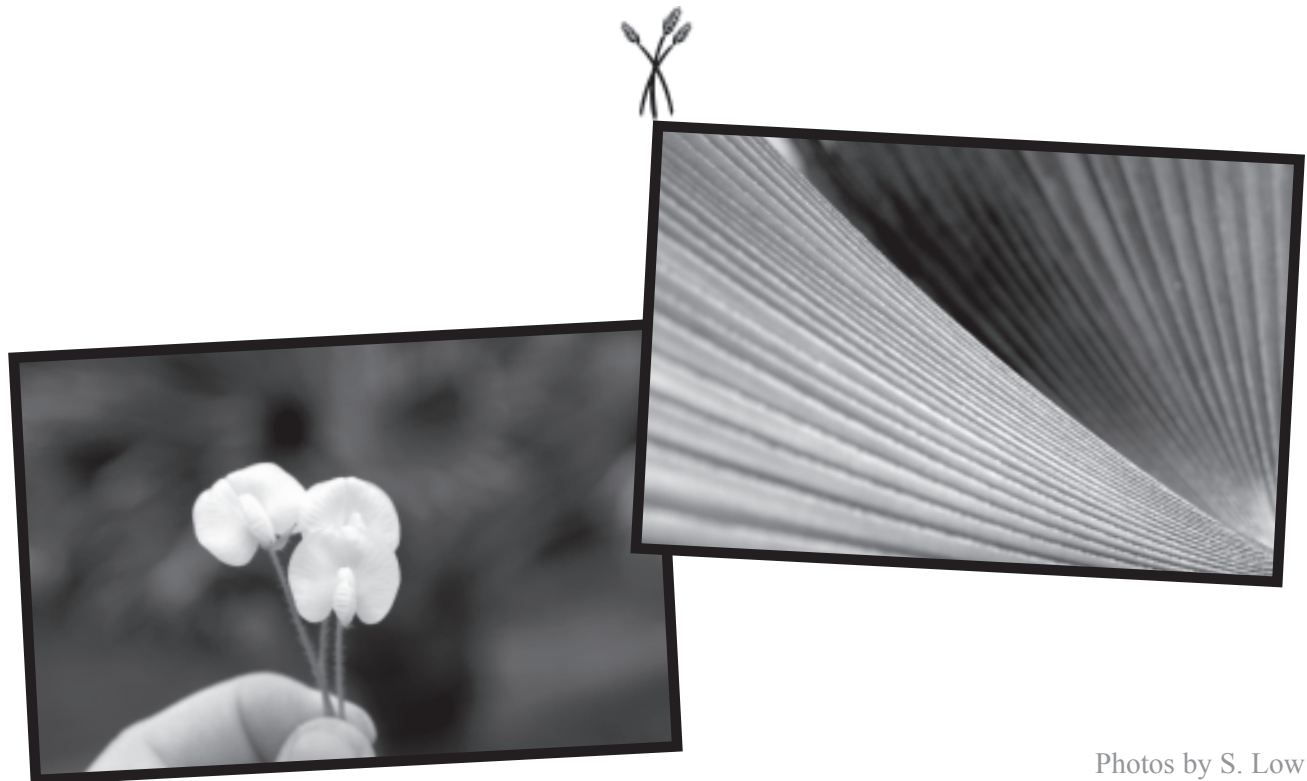
Eucharist

Recreation

Meal

After this time of inward reflection, end your time of retreat by looking outward: “God, how do you want me to use what I’ve given me this weekend as I return to my life?”

JACKIE L. HALSTEAD HAS A GREAT DEAL OF EXPERIENCE WITH SILENCE AND SOLITUDE. SHE HAS BEEN GOING ON SILENT RETREATS FOR TWENTY YEARS AND LEADING THEM FOR THE PAST TEN. SHE NOW REQUIRES THEM IN MANY OF HER GRADUATE CLASSES AND IS THRILLED TO SEE THE MANNER IN WHICH STUDENTS ENCOUNTER GOD THROUGH THESE TIMES OF RETREAT (JACKIE.HALSTEAD@LIPSCOMB.EDU).



Photos by S. Low